

## **10.2. PARENTS\***

Parents as individuals can play an important role in their children's behaviors and value systems. While there are steps that schools can take with regard to some problems pertaining to parents like parenting skills there is not much that schools can control with respect to parents. However, it is very useful for schools to be aware of these factors so that they can accommodate related information into their policy discussions pertaining to school safety.

This section highlights parental involvement at home and in school and its impact on student discipline.

### **Parental involvement at home**

Parental involvement with children is becoming increasingly difficult given various responsibilities of working couples and single parents, amongst other things. Yet, it continues to be one of the important factors that determines student behavior and discipline. Twenty five percent of the respondents (three principals and thirteen teachers) shared their perceptions on the extent of this problem in schools today.

#### **Non-involvement**

One teacher (cell 9) expressed concern with lack of parental involvement in children's lives, especially at parent-teacher meetings. The teacher illustrated how some parents ask the teachers *"why did you call me down here? He won't listen to me at home, so why do you want me to come down for this parent conference? I hear this from parents on and on and on. But at that point when the kid's fifteen, and the parents are saying that, well you're right, there's nothing she can do. The problem is when he was five, that's when she hadn't taken the iron, that's caused him to be this way"*.

Another teacher (cell 2) shared a concern on similar lines that *"parental neglect really molds these kids and by the time they get to be eleven or twelve years old, their behaviors a lot of times are so set, and then with the passive permissiveness that the society or the parental structure or peer group structure has given them, now they may be on a road that is not a productive road for them"*.

Some teachers discussed the apathy that parents can sometimes have towards their children. One teacher (cell 5) remarked that the parent's feeling is *"why should I get involved in my kid's school, my kid's not going to do any better than I did. Why would you want to do better than I've done? What makes you think that you can do better than I did?"* And this kind of attitude can lead to very negative reinforcements for children.

In the end, one teacher (cell 15) perceived how the transition took place and how parental involvement declined over the years. *"I think probably in the 60's and 70's the kids had a*

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\* See Appendix 2 for cell references in text.

*lot more backing at home from parents that if you had a problem you could call home and mom and dad would come in and see you, or they would talk to the child and try and get something done. I think that changed a little bit in the middle 80's to maybe even today. We have so many parents working now. We've got double people working in a household, and lots of split families, and so I don't think that parents have as much input. It's not that they don't care, but I think they kind of rely on the school to do it, it's your problem from 8:00-3:00".*

On the contrary there are several parents who do take an active interest in their children's lives and schools have a responsibility of making parents aware about situations at school so they can become more informed. One principal (cell 9) pointed out that *"parents out here, a lot of them aren't as aware of what's going on. I think we need to work on awareness, community awareness for things like the gang issues, the drug issues"*.

### **Responsibility and discipline**

Some parents do not display a sense of responsibility towards their children and many teachers perceived this as problematic. One teacher (cell 2) observed that *"we've done community teaching and brought parents in, but it's not the parents we want to talk to that come, those parents are the concerned parents. I've had kids that walk in their parents complaining about something we did, and the parent's drunk. You know, there's not a lot we can do with that because we still have a parental right situation where the parents get to raise the kids. Unfortunately, we never said they had to raise the kids in a good manner"*.

However, another teacher (cell 7) brought up the issue of joint responsibility for students, by the students themselves, in addition to the parents and teachers. *"There's only so much we can do as teachers. They say that responsibility is 1/3rd teachers, 1/3rd the parents and 1/3rd the students. So you got those three to work with each other and I think that one of the things that needs to be worked around here is teaching the parents how to take care of their kids"*.

### **Value system**

It becomes a futile exercise when the school and parents educate kids with varying value systems, with the latter sometimes promoting negative values in their children. For example, one teacher (cell 6) commented that *"in the past we've had incidences where the parents got into fights and then the kids come and get into a fight at school. We're trying to deal with them and tell them fighting is wrong and here their parents are beating each other. So it really comes down to if they've got support at home, they're pretty much doing fine."*

Another teacher (cell 14) discussed the issue of values. *"What I've seen is students don't get the strong family orientation. And I see the same thing in practices towards safety, towards everything. There's just no knowledge of right or wrong, no information, so they're never sure what's right or wrong. The philosophy today is it's not wrong if you*

*don't get caught. We see that through the news, cheating is only wrong if you're caught and if you're caught you're stupid".* Such a philosophy regarding school violence and safety related issues could be very harmful to students.

In summary, the issue of declining parental involvement is becoming problematic with respect to school discipline. In the words of a teacher (cell 12) *"schools are having to replace parents"*. Some of the major problems that were revealed in course of the interviews were parental neglect and apathy. Also, working/ single parents are finding it increasingly difficult to spend time with their children and to raise them with values and discipline like in the past.

### **Parental involvement in school**

Parents play an important role in their kid's personal and academic life. The interaction that parents have with their kids can determine how the kids behave and perform in school. Forty five percent of the respondents (one bus driver, two counselors, one head of security, thirteen principals, one SRO, and eleven teachers) shared their perceptions on parental involvement in their school.

#### **Parent-Teacher Association (PTA)**

Almost all schools arrange for PTAs in order to provide a common ground to discuss the kids and make decisions that will benefit them academically and personally. While some parents take active interest in the PTAs there are others who do not want to participate or don't have the time to participate. This can in turn have many direct and indirect consequences for the kids. One teacher (cell 7) shared a concern that a very small percentage of the parents in the school attend the PTA meetings. *"During our parent/teacher conferences, of the 120 students that I have, only about 12 to 15 parents show up, of whom about half are grandparents. I think the problem is a lack of interest in their kids' education. That's probably the main reason why a lot of these kids are turned off school"*.

A paradox related to low PTA attendance is that parents who do attend them are not those of kids with discipline problems. On the contrary they are almost always parents of successful and trouble-free kids. In the words of one head of security (cell 9) *"we'll only get the parents that are not really needed. We need the bad student's parents to come in, and those are the ones that usually stay away. It's the ones that you really want to see are the ones that never show up"*.

One teacher (cell 6) revealed failures the school experienced on this front despite repeated efforts. *"We had an open house, a meet the teacher night. Instead of having them come to us, because a lot of them don't have transportation, we went to them but nobody showed up"*.

Given these drawbacks, some interviewees suggested some measures that are being taken, or can be taken, in order to improve PTA attendance. One counselor (cell 3) discussed an experience from a previous school. *"They had parents come into the school*

*and they were being paid for minimum wages just to do this for six weeks. They were on the payroll". While such innovative measures might prove to be useful they have their loopholes and must be approached with caution.*

Another suggestion to improve communication was made by a principal (cell 9). *"One of the things that we've done at school is we've tried to increase communication from the teachers as well as administration to get to the parents by writing to them, calling them, or visiting them. Whatever you need to do to let them know what's going on academically, to bring them in and get them involved".*

One teacher (cell 15) shared a success story with PTA attendance. *"We had our band, our cheerleaders, our chorus, our orchestra and everybody gave a little ten minute performance in trying to get more parents to come on campus. We wanted them to be involved, and the only time you'll ever see a lot of the parents is if their kids are involved in something".* Such occasions can then become good venues for discussions on any important concerns the school might have.

### **Parenting skills**

Several interviewees brought up the importance of parenting skills. Parents who are equipped with the right skills are in a position to benefit their kids personally and academically. On the other hand, bad parenting can lead to negative outcomes. One teacher (cell 8) observed that *"my biggest problem is that if I discipline a child at school I would hope that the parent would support me in my measures at home".*

There are many parents who do have the right parenting skills and they are in a position to help their children at home and in school. Children of such parents are in a position to succeed and stay out of trouble. One teacher (cell 1) commended how *"a lot of parents push their kids even though they can't help them. You see those kids just flourish, work hard, do whatever it takes to get the answer, and do what it takes to get an A, because their parents expectations are high. The ones I get frustrated with are the parents whose expectations are not high, who make excuses for their children, and who believe that this is better than what it was and it's okay. Their kids don't strive for any better and that's who I get frustrated with".*

For example, a teacher (cell 5) shared a concern that *"we have a lot of children here who are not used to succeeding. There is a lot of apathy, parents come in to conferences and say I didn't do well in school, I dropped out of school, I hated Science, I hated Social Studies, I never did learn to read. It runs in the family so I don't care if my kid can understand. Apathy breeds apathy".* Such poor parenting skills and apathy can lead to destructive consequences if not handled appropriately.

### **Parental interference**

While parental involvement in school is essential it is also important for parents not to overly interfere with school discipline, and to know where to draw the line. Interviewees shared several examples where parents preferred calling the shots and giving their kids

conflicting signals. One principal (cell 10) discussed how this can become problematic. *“There are a lot of people who teach their kids to stand up for themselves. If somebody punches you, you punch them back. We tell the parents that we don't have any objections to their teaching the kids whatever they want. But in the school if you punch back, then you're part of the fight and the consequence goes to you too. And some parents have a problem with that because we are teaching them the opposite of what they are teaching”*.

Another principal (cell 13) commented on a similar problem with student discipline when there is parental interference. *“I've had some fairly affluent families that were not pleased because we disciplined their children. Politically you wonder whether you're going to have a job the next day or not. But if you hold firm I think there's a level of respect among the community members. If you're consistent with everyone they can't argue with you”*.

Parental cooperation as opposed to interference, therefore, goes a long way in benefiting the students and their overall discipline. One principal (cell 16) pointed out that many parents are extremely involved in the lives of their kids. *“Parents will call us up and alert us to the fact that people on campus may have drugs and then we immediately go after them and it's very aggressive”*.

In summary, this section discussed the need for parental involvement in schools so the kids can be productive and disciplined. Parental involvement with PTAs and the need for positive parenting skills was discussed. The interviewees also cautioned that while parental involvement is a positive element, parental interference is not.

This concludes this section on parental influence on school safety. The following section discusses perceptions pertaining to student factors and their impact on school safety.